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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000071

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, DS, CA/OCS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

E.O. 12958 N/A

TAGS: ASEC CASC PGOV SL

SUBJECT: POLICE AND YOUTH CLASH AFTER GASOLINE INCIDENT

SUMMARY

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¶1. (SBU) Early on the morning of January 27, Sierra Leone Police (SLP) clashed with a group of youths in the Cole Farm area of Freetown near many Embassy residences after officers attempted to arrest a taxi driver whom they thought was in possession of illegal fuel. There are conflicting accounts of the incident. The SLP claimed that the taxi driver ignited the fuel in question in an attempt to evade being arrested and sustained severe burns, while the taxi driver claimed that the police set him on fire after he refused to hand over the fuel. He also claimed that police officers attempted to flee the scene instead of rendering assistance. The altercation quickly drew a crowd, and police reinforcements were called to disperse an angry crowd of approximately 100-150 youths. Some media reports claim that the police fired multiple rounds of live ammunition as warning shots, which the police denied. Many Embassy personnel said that they heard what sounded like gunshots. Police did admit to using tear gas on the crowd. There were no further reported incidents of violence following the altercation. The SLP is investigating the incident and plans to implement new procedures to ensure public safety. END SUMMARY.

SLP CONFRONTS ALLEGED BLACK MARKET FUEL RUNNER

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¶2. (U) On January 27, Sierra Leone Police (SLP) officers allegedly attempted to apprehend a taxi driver, whom they believed was in possession of stolen gasoline. Details are still unclear, but reportedly an altercation ensued, during which a container of gasoline was ignited by either the taxi driver, a bystander, or the police, severely burning the taxi driver and moderately injuring one police officer. Police called for reinforcements when a group of approximately 100-150 disgruntled youth gathered and attacked the police in reaction to the altercation.

¶3. (SBU) The RSO investigated the scene a few hours after the incident and saw broken glass, large rocks, debris and various charred items in the middle and to the side of the street. He also observed that a majority of the activity appeared to have taken place between two local grocery stores that Embassy staff often frequent on Wilkinson Road. The RSO noted that the SLP was maintaining a presence in the area, but appeared to be in stand-down mode. Crowds remained in the area, and the RSO witnessed only one other incident where a group of local youths threw large rocks and other debris in the middle of the road. The police quickly dispersed the group and cleared the street of debris. By noon, normal traffic flows had resumed and local stores were open.

¶4. (SBU) The senior police advisor for the UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) told the RSO that he was briefed by the SLP on the situation and was told that the incident location is a well-known area where stolen property and black market gasoline are sold. Police also said that their intelligence indicates that some

military personnel, living in the Freetown neighborhood of Murray Town, may be siphoning fuel from officials' vehicles and selling the product in the vicinity. Police believed that some individuals sympathetic to black market fuel sellers were planning to launch an attack on the police in retaliation.

SLP PLANS RESPONSE

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15. (SBU) The SLP told the senior UN police advisor that it planned to intensify police patrols in several parts of the city to ensure public safety, conduct a full-scale investigation into the incident, require police patrols to work in teams of at least five officers to prevent attacks by disgruntled youths, and deploy plainclothes officers to monitor and gather information in respect to the incident. SLP officials said that these measures are necessary to help allay public fears that the SLP does not possess the capability to monitor security during the forthcoming July national elections. The SLP also plans to embark on a robust media strategy to give the public their version of events.

16. (SBU) Although shell casings were found at the scene, a preliminary SLP investigation indicated that no other persons were injured, and there was no evidence indicating that other persons received gunshot wounds during the incident. However, press reports claim that at least one bystander received a bullet wound. The police admitted to only firing several rounds of tear gas.

EMBASSY RESPONSE

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17. (U) All Embassy employees were advised to exercise caution by avoiding the area in question for that day, and the Embassy immediately issued a Warden Message apprising Amcits in country of the situation. No Embassy employees were involved or injured, and no

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damage was done to USG property. Post has not received any reports of injuries to Amcits and will continue to monitor the situation.

COMMENT

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18. (SBU) It is still unclear who initiated the altercation, and who actually ignited the fuel. The truth may never be clear. There is wide speculation, reported by various media, that the SLP patrol was at fault and had set the taxi driver on fire. This incident serves as another reminder of how quickly events can turn violent in Sierra Leone and of the level of the general public's distrust of the SLP. Freetown is once again calm, and tensions appear to have diminished since the incident, although we cannot rule out the possibility of more unrest. END COMMENT.